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THE ROLE OF WOMEN'S ORGANIZATIONS IN DEVELOPMENT IN BOTSWANA

by

Ruth Ketlhapile Motsete

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FOREWORD

This paper was written for the ECA/ATRCW-sponsored course, Training in Development Planning and Women: An African Perspective, which was held at the Eastern and Southern African Management Institute (ESAMI) from 1 June to 7 August 1981. It deals with women's organizations in Botswana and the role they play in development. The backgrounds and activities of the nine organizations described are similar to some extent and rather than outlining the objectives of each group, I chose to highlight their activities, since their common goal is to improve women's lives and society as a whole. Membership, funding and strengths and weaknesses of women's organizations in Botswana are covered in general.

The views expressed in this paper are solely my own and do not represent the views of any organization.

Ruth K. Motsete
Gaborone, Botswana

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Introduction

Women's organizations in Botswana did not originate with independence in 1966. Long before independence, women's groups were formed for collective labour, such as weeding, harvesting, house building and village projects. As some of their activities were seasonal, these groups were very informal; there were no set rules to be followed. These groups served as social service organizations among families, especially among those living in close proximity.

In Botswana there are three types of residential areas: the lands, the cattle-post and the village. Planting and ploughing are carried out on the lands and since they are far from the village, people migrate to the lands in October and only return after harvesting. Livestock is kept at the cattle-post, where herdboys work under the supervision of an older man. In the village, where everybody lives, there are facilities such as schools, hospitals, shops, etc.

School children usually remain in the village during the farming season but they visit the lands every week-end to collect food and help with the work. Families work collectively on the lands in order to finish work quickly and return to the village to undertake development projects. This interdependence is known as letsema.

As soon as people return to the village they repair the chief's residence, as he is responsible for receiving visitors from outside the village. The people also repair the teachers' quarters and erect new houses. The work is carried out by age groups known as regiments or mephats. Each group is headed by sons and daughters of royal lineage. Men and women who belong to the same mephats do not necessarily work together; the men have their task to do and the women have theirs. In the event a child of a women's group member gets married, her group takes the initiative in clearing the surrounding area and on the day of the wedding, the group is assigned some job like preparing a certain dish or brewing beer for the occasion. Women feel proud about performing this service and do it voluntarily. Such traditional women's groups in Botswana are well-organized, disciplined and self-reliant. Contemporary women's organizations in Botswana have their antecedents in this tradition of women's volunteerism.

With the advent of independence, contemporary women's organizations were established. Today, a women's organization is not legally recognized unless it has a constitution and is registered under the Societies Act with the Ministry of Home Affairs. Although informal organizations are still in existence, today there are more formal ones like the Girl Guides Association, the Young Women's Christian Association, the Nurses Association, Christian Women's Fellowship, the Botswana Council of Women, the Botswana Teachers' Union, the Business and Professional Women's Club, Women in Development and the Association of Botswana Women's Organizations. Below, the background and activities of each of these organizations and issues that concern the organizations in general are described.

Girl Guides Association

In 1924, guiding was started in Botswana (then the Bechuanaland Protectorate). However, Botswana was not admitted as an associate member of the World Guides in Finland until 1969, following South Africa's break from the Commonwealth in 1961. Until that time, the Bechuanaland Protectorate Guide Movement was under South Africa's jurisdiction.

The Girl Guides Association is a service organization which stresses readiness and willingness to help others. It has an eight-point programme which is followed in training girls and developing their potential. The eight points are: development of the mind; physical fitness; character building; creative ability to serve others; homecraft skills and the enjoyment of outdoor life. The guide motto, 'be prepared', challenges every citizen to rise to the occasion in times of crisis.

A guide is able to help in times of need because of the training she receives from the organization. For example, guides provide medical assistance where there are no medical facilities. Projects like tree-planting, gardening, safety programmes and handicrafts, are also carried out in different parts of the country by guides. To motivate members, the Association awards certificates and badges for good performance.

Young Women's Christian Association (Y.W.C.A.)

This organization was formed in 1962. It is one of the largest in the country and since it was established it has rendered a number of community services. At its headquarters in the capital city, Gaborone, informal education, adult education and literacy classes are offered. These programmes are offered for women and men, as well as members and non-members. At the same centre a cafeteria is being built where working men and women can buy meals at a low price. The Y.W.C.A. also provides accommodation and other organizations can use its centre for seminars, conferences, symposiums, etc. The centre caters for everybody who is interested in using it. The world Y.W.C.A. organization is always helpful, both financially and technically, whenever initiative is taken at the local level.

The most outstanding service provided by the Y.W.C.A. in Botswana is its service to refugees. The organization has rented a few houses to accommodate refugees and refugees can enrol in Y.W.C.A. programmes. Those who graduate from the programmes either become self-employed or are employed elsewhere.

Nurses Association of Botswana (N.A.B.)

As nursing is a female-dominated profession, one would think that an organization like the Nurses Association would have been formed prior to independence. However, such was not the case. During colonial days, Botswana nurses were trained in either Southern Rhodesia or South Africa where most of them also preferred to work.

The Nurses Association of Botswana was founded in 1969. Since that time it has been collaborating with the Ministry of Health on matters affecting the profession including in-service training of nurses. It must be mentioned that the organization only caters for State-registered nurses and not for enrolled nurses. The Association produces an annual nursing journal, Dumel Mooki, which disseminates information on health care and the activities of the Association. It is author's view that the public should ask the Association to arrange public lectures by nurses on various medical topics for the benefit of the public.

Christian Women's Fellowship (C.W.F.)

The Fellowship serves as a co-ordinating body which renders both Christian and social services. It is a new organization whose membership consists of women from different churches and different backgrounds. Since colonial times, there has been a very wide gap between established churches and independent or spiritual churches. The Fellowship is quickly narrowing that gap; churches now look upon each other as partners rather than rivals. The organization holds an annual seminar where Christian women conduct Bible study on a rotating basis and exchange ideas and experiences about Christian fellowship. The organization does not follow programmes which are independent from those of the churches, as it is affiliated with the Botswana Christian Council.

Members of the Fellowship have expressed concern for youth. They organized a workshop on adolescent fertility management in Gaborone in 1980 and they now plan to hold similar workshops throughout the country. The Fellowship invites young people, church leaders, local leaders and parents to these workshops to discuss and help solve youth problems. This year at its annual seminar in May, the Fellowship invited a psychiatrist to address the seminar on drug addiction and alcoholism. After discussing these topics at length, seminar participants made recommendations to the Government.

The Fellowship is currently represented on the project screening committee of the Botswana Christian Council which plays a very important role in supporting general women's projects. The Central District Council has given one of its nursery schools to the Fellowship and they are now preparing to meet this new challenge.

Botswana Council of Women (B.C.W.)

When the Botswana Council of Women was established in 1965, its original purpose was to unify existing women's groups in the country. For one reason or another, this purpose was never fulfilled and the organization developed different objectives. The Council is one of the largest women's organizations in the country. Although the name of the organization includes a reference to women, membership is also open to men and a few have already joined.

With the advent of independence, women developed greater interest in employment outside the home. Most women needed skills training and facilities for that purpose were usually located in towns. Women who undertook such training either left their small children with their parents or took them along. To help women who brought their small children with them, the Botswana Council of Women built nursery schools or day-care centres. As a result, women could attend their courses or go to work without worrying about who would look after their children. The Council also started handicraft classes and some literacy classes in rural areas.

One of the Council's annual activities is the Miss Botswana beauty contest. Some national queens have gone on to participate in the Miss World Contest. This is a fund-raising venture for the organization, which provides contestants with an interesting experience.

Another project the Council sponsored was the building of bus shelters. These provided protection from the rain and severe heat. Because the Council assumed responsibility for this project the Government could look at other problems that required attention.

Botswana Teachers' Union (Women's Desk)

The Botswana Teachers' Union (Women's Desk) is the women's branch of the Teachers' Union. This organization assists the Ministry of Education in formulating the country's education policies and also guards against sex discrimination in the teaching profession. Before the entire Botswana Teachers' Union meets at a national conference, the Women's Desk holds its own conference, where members discuss issues which concern them and make recommendations to the parent organization. The group also sponsors music competitions among teachers in order to raise money to expand the activities of the organization.

Business and Professional Women's Club of Botswana (B.P.W.)

This organization was established in Botswana in 1972 by a European woman. It is affiliated with the International Federation of Business and Professional Women. The name of this group accounts for its limited membership; some professionals feel that as they already belong to an organization which directly concerns their professions, there is no reason to join this one. Other women feel that because they are non-professional or do not own businesses, they do not qualify for membership. Although the organization's constitution stresses business and the professions, homemakers are welcome in the group. Steps are being taken to make the constitution as relevant as possible to Botswana. The organization is a social and consciousness-raising one. It is beneficial not only to its members but to everyone.

Basic managerial and accounting skills are taught by various lecturers at the invitationof the organization. Members address themselves such questions as how women can have access to loans and to the problems of intelligent young girls who lack sufficient financial support to complete their studies. B.P.W. has assisted a few girls with their secondary education by providing them with scholarships. At one point the group supported a boy's education as well.

On another occasion, when Parliament appointed a reform committee to review marriage laws, the Business and Professional Women's Club organized a workshop and invited all interested women to discuss current marriage laws and to present their recommendations to the reform committee. The workshop was successful and a two-member delegation presented recommendations to the committee. Everyone is awaiting the outcome of the exercise.

In Gaborone, the capital city, there is a low-income area which is currently being upgraded. This area is called Old Naledi and most of the people who live here are unemployed and have no source of income. This situation affects both men and women but women are the most deeply affected. With the aid of the Economic Commission for Africa, the Business and Professional Women's Club sent one of its members to West Africa for training in tie and dye techniques. When that member returned, she taught tie and dye skills to a group of 15 women from Old Naledi. The Business and Professional Women's Club bought materials and dyes for the group and with the profit the women earned, more materials and dyes were purchased and the women earned a small wage. Botswanacraft promised to buy the products but because Botswana depends on South Africa for materials and dyes, the group was not able to obtain enough raw materials and was therefore unable to meet market demand. These women now produce tie and dye items in their homes; because they can generate income for their families, their standard of living has risen.

Women in Development Committee

This is an interministerial committee composed of women holding senior public service posts. Although most of the women on the Committee do not belong to women's organizations, their role is a very important one as they brief and influence the Government on women's issues. Other women's groups in the country are not yet familiar with this organization's goals and the Committee is doing everything possible to publicize its role and encourage women's organizations to send representatives. Other members of the Committee include researchers and a representative of the Inter-agency Women in Development Committee. This Committee is a government machinery for the integration of women in development and it is the author's view that other women's groups should not see it as a threat but rather as a liaison between Government and women.

Association of Botswana Women's Organizations (A.B.W.O.)

This organization was formed in November after a series of meetings was mandated by a directive from the President and the Cabinet. The meetings were chaired by a Cabinet Minister and the Ministry of Home Affairs acted as the secretariat because voluntary organizations are under the jurisdiction of

that Ministry. Reports were made to the Cabinet periodically.

Before women's organizations agreed to have A.B.W.O. act as a co-ordinating body for all of them, the Government used to face problems when invitations came from outside the country for women to attend conferences. It was difficult to decide which organization should receive the invitation without causing conflict. Women's organizations welcomed the idea of a co-ordinating body and drafted a constitution which was scrutinized and approved by the Attorney General's office.

When the organization was established, certain issues were debated. Among these issues were the choice of the State President's wife as president of the new organization and naming the organization the National Council of Women. Most women's groups felt that the first lady would be a satisfactory honorary leader and that the name was inappropriate because there was already an organization called the Botswana Council of Women. Because the Botswana Council of Women had supported these two proposals, the Council decided to withdraw from A.B.W.O. However, the Botswana Council of Women is treated as an equal with the Association of Botswana Women s Organizations. It is the author's opinion that this is defeating the purpose of the directive and is even giving some people reason to believe that women cannot work together.

The group has already started a poultry project in one village known as Tlokweng. The project will reduce Botswana's dependence on South Africa for eggs and poultry and create employment opportunities in a few villages. Lectures on poultry farming, health care, simple book-keeping, horticulture and family planning will be given by members of affiliated groups at the project site. The lectures will be conducted for female drop-outs and self-employed women.

A.B.W.O. has six affiliates; these include all of the organizations mentioned above except the Botswana Council of Women and the Women in Development Committee. Since the formation of A.B.W.O. there is an element of closeness and co-operation between affiliated groups. Groups are always interested in knowing what other groups are doing in order to be of help. All groups attend an annual general meeting. Each group sends three representatives and three observers to report on group activities during the year and future plans. The organization has its headquarters in Gaborone and efforts are now being made to decentralize it by establishing committees at village, district and regional levels.

Leadership in Women's Organizations in Botswana

In most women's organizations positions of leadership are open to all members and the leadership is reviewed either annually or once every three years. The Botswana Council of Women reviews its leadership every three years but the presidential post and the two vice-presidential posts have been held by the same women since the organization was established in 1965.

Because leadership is drawn from high circles (e.g. the first lady and chief wives), most women find it difficult to air their views freely or to make positive criticisms without being black-listed as trouble-makers. This situation makes it difficult for young women to rise to positions of leadership and they sometimes feel they are not truly members of the organization when their contributions are not taken seriously.

To a certain extent, problems of leadership can prevent women's groups from attaining their goals. It is the writer's view that each leader should examine herself critically with a view to changing her attitude to improve her performance.

Membership in Women's Organizations in Botswana

Membership in organizations is not restricted on the basis of religion, social status, political affiliation, race or age. Members come from rural and urban areas. Membership is not only open to Botswana women; when an organization is affiliated with an international group, temporary members are accepted and their membership is transferrable when they move to other countries. It is the author's opinion that each group should try to balance its membership as much as possible. The biggest problems concerning membership are that each group's membership is gradually dropping and that the groups fail to attract many educated women.

Funding for Women's Organizations in Botswana

Women's organizations in Botswana lack funds to carry out some of their planned national projects. The Government gives a small annual grant to individual women's organizations but this grant is far smaller than that which is given to football associations. It is the writer's opinion that this shows that the Government takes women's organizations for granted. Most of the money for projects comes from the women's own fundraising efforts. There are various ways of raising money but the most common are international dinners, concerts, jumble and cake sales, beauty contests, fashion parades, sponsored walks and simply asking people for donations from people. Other funds come from outside the country through such organizations as the Botswana Christian Council and United Nations agencies. The writer must mention that very little information about the Voluntary Fund for the United Nations Decade for Women has been available to Botswana women's organizations.

Because of lack of funds and lack of information about funding agencies, some projects have been postponed. For example, women's organizations have not been able to provide members with funds to start their own businesses. Also, because of insufficient funding, most women's organizations in the country do not have offices and are unable to employ personnel for the day-to-day administration of the organizations. With access to more flexible, long-term funding, women's organizations in Botswana could be more responsive and supportive of local initiative.

Strengths and Weaknesses of Women's Organizations

Women's organizations in Botswana could be very strong if the Government would give them sufficient opportunity. Each year a different women's organization hosts the Miss Trade Fair competition at the international trade fair or hosts the Independence Ball a day before the anniversary of independence. Both of these functions generate a lot of money, which demonstrates to the Government that if women could participate in the formulation of economic policy, a lot would be achieved.

All of the activities of the various organizations mentioned above show how strong women's organizations are. Women's groups are actively taking part in the social, economic and cultural development of the country but one of their weaknesses is their lack of interest in their own and the country's political development. For example, most of the country's voters are women but women rarely use their vote to influence policy. Most if not all women's organizations define themselves as non-political when they actually mean to define themselves as non-partisan. It is the writer's view that politics cannot and should not be avoided when dealing with development.

The withdrawal of B.C.W. from A.B.W.O. was discussed earlier. B.C.W.'s conduct after its withdrawal was not proper as the organization used government influence to protect itself whenever there was a difference between B.C.W. and A.B.W.O, and B.C.W. even used lawyers to threaten A.B.W.O. It is unquestionably true that women's organizations should not work independently from the Government. However, Government should not favour one women's organization over another as it is the only power capable of resolving problems by applying the four national principles of unity, democracy, development and self-reliance.

Women's organizations in Botswana are sometimes discouraged when they send resolutions and recommendations to the Government and the Government fails to take action. The Government does not always appoint women who are members of women's groups to national commissions like the Commission of Housing, the Salary Review Commission or the National Development Bank Board, where they could influence policy on women's issues. The Government maintains that it cannot give special consideration to women's issues. However, it has been acknowledged for some time that women have been discriminated against and the United Nations has repeatedly advocated the elimination of all discriminatory practices against women. It is the writer's opinion that women need special support on their behalf if they are to become men's equals.

Another weakness of women's organizations is that some of them are resistant to change. The conservatism of some women's groups discourages young women who have new ideas and also causes some educated women to lose interest in women's organizations. It is the author's opinion that change is inevitable; objectives change as old ones are fulfilled and new ones take their place.

Recommendations and Strategies

It is recommended that:

1. The Government should give women a chance to participate in policy formulation and implementation through women's organizations and government machinery for the integration of women in development;

2. Women's organizations should use senior female public servants as liaisons between the Government and women;

3. Women's organizations should educate society and especially men about women's participation in all spheres of development and should make them aware that if women are left behind, little if anything can be achieved;

4. Individual women should educate their families as to the importance of women's organizations and should invite family members to come to their group meetings;

5. Planners, who are mostly men, should seek information about women from women's organizations since these organizations are largely composed of rural women and it is in the rural areas where development is stressed in order to avert urban migration;

6. Women's organizations should be as political in orientation as they are economic, cultural and social in orientation;

7. Women's organizations should develop a positive attitude towards politics as one way to develop the nation;

8. Women's organizations should freely criticize themselves and the Government whenever there is a need;

9. Government should allow women's organizations to exercise freedom of speech without fear of reprisals;

10. Government should make sure that women's organizations enjoy freedom to choose new leadership and should see to it that leadership posts are not held for a lifetime;

11. Women's organizations should elect leaders based on candidates' contributions to their organization's goals rather than on candidates' social status;

12. Government should give the Association of Botswana Women's Organizations the status it deserves: it should be recognized as the co-ordinating body of all women's groups;

13. The Association of Botswana Women's Organizations should carry out its activities as co-ordinating body and should press for recognition as such;

14. The Government should increase financial support to women's organizations;

15. The Government should support a co-ordinating body for all women's organizations in order to avoid unnecessary duplication of services and programmes;

16. The Government should encourage international donors to aid Botswana women's organizations financially so they can carry out their projects; such assistance should be co-ordinated by a body composed of representatives from all women's organizations;

17. Women's organizations should narrow the gap between men and women and the young and the old through effective use of the mass media and public lectures and by allowing free participation in all of their activities;

18. Since most of the goals women's organizations had established for themselves have been achieved, the organizations should amend their constitutions in order to incorporate new objectives and new activities;

19. Organizations affliated with international groups should amend their international constitutions to suit local needs and these constitutions should allow member countries flexibility;

20. Government should encourage employers to give women the opportunity to attend conferences, seminars, workshops and courses on women's issues with pay and without using their earned leave;

21. Women's organizations should encourage political leaders to foster women's development instead of having political leaders exploit women's organizations to achieve their own ends;

22. Educated woman should develop an interest in women's organizations and should help to raise the standard of living of their less-educated sisters;

23. Womens' organizations should call upon female lawyers to explain to women how the law affects them and such professionals should be prepared to help without payment;

24. As a member State of the United Nations and the Organization of African Unity, the Government should implement recommendations passed at conferences and meetings organized by these bodies;

25. Government should recognize the knowledge women have acquired in national and international training courses and should give these women a chance to use that knowledge freely to the advantage of the nation;

26. Botswana women should take an interest in research conducted by local rather than foreign researchers as foreign researchers may distort information about the local situation;

27. Women should develop greater interest in national and international affairs by reading, attending film shows and watching television and women should also contribute articles to women's publications;

28. Botswana women should undertake educational preparation for leadership posts in the country and in international bodies like OAU and ECA and especially ATRCW and other UN agencies, where they might work as consultants in matters that affect women;

29. The International Women in Development Committee should be legally recognized as a government machinery for the integration of women in development and the possibility of re-instating women's affairs under the Ministry of Local Government and Lands should be reviewed by the Government.